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ABSTRACT

The document summarizes a study on stress and coping in a group of college students. In this study, 30 community college students, who were enrolled in an experientially taught stress reduction course, completed measures of stress, support, and coping strategies. The purpose of this study was to explore the possible positive effects of experiential learning and to shed light on stressors affecting the community college student. Of the 30 students, 27 were females, and the mean age was 27.57. All of the students were of minority group status. The 3-hour course met twice a week and was divided into an hour lecture, which covered topics such as recognizing and restructuring distorted perceptions, assertive communication and active listening, and time management. An additional 2-hour weekly session was held in the dance studio and focused on stress-reducing activities. Levels of stress and coping were measured using the adult form of the Life Stressors and Social Resources Inventory (LISRES-A) and the adult form of the Coping Resources Inventory (CRI-A). Students reported higher levels of stress associated with negative life events at the beginning of the semester. No differences were found between perceived positive life events at the beginning and end of the semester. The students showed an increased use of avoidance strategies at the end of the semester, although the change was not statistically significant. (Contains 20 references.) (JA)

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Stressors and Coping Strategies In Community College Students

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was twofold: to explore the possible positive effects of experiential learning, and to shed light on stressors affecting the community college student. Thirty students enrolled in a Stress Reduction course that combined traditional learning methods with stress reduction activities completed measures of stress, support, and coping strategies. There was a significant difference in students' perception of negative life events from the beginning to the end of the semester. Because the course focused on recognizing and restructuring distorted perceptions, as well as on using more assertive communications, it is possible that as a result of the class, students shifted the way in which they appraised their various concerns. No differences were found between perceived positive life events at the beginning and end of the semester; students reported somewhat above average support on both the pre and post measures. In essence, the data implies that while students perceive fewer negative life events after participating in the class, they do not report an increase in positive life events. Comparisons between coping responses on pre and post measures yielded no significant results. Students used typical coping strategies to deal with stress. Of interest though not statistically significant, the students in this sample showed an increased use of avoidance strategies at the end of the semester. The discussion focuses on understanding the issues that are most troublesome to our students in order to develop and initiate proactive measures that will not only improve their well being, but which will hopefully also improve the students' chances to complete their education.

Key words: Stress, coping, community colleges, support, minority status.

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INTRODUCTION

The literature on stress and coping is extensive. The concepts of stress and coping have become buzzwords in the American vocabulary, as we have come to accept stress as a way of life. Stress refers to the distress experienced from real or perceived demands, while coping can be defined as the strategies used to manage that distress. Thus, it is difficult to discuss one without in some way, invoking the other. It is well documented that stress permeates almost, if not all, aspects of human existence (Breznitz, S. & Goldberger, L., 1982). Researchers in the last twenty years have not only defined stress and coping, but have studied its effects on health, age, and general well being (Lazarus and Folkman, 1982, Timko, C., Moos, R., & Michelson, D., 1993). Repeated exposure to stress has been linked to increased health risks, as individuals turn to smoking, as well as alcohol and drug use (Stone, Lennox and Neale, 1985; Cooper, Russell, Skinner, Frone, & Mudar, 1992). Stress has also been shown to have negative effects on work and academic performance (Towbes & Cohen, 1996; Holt, 1982). Individuals experiencing developmental transitions, such as adolescence, have been found to be particularly vulnerable to the effects of stress (Cohen, Burt, Bjorck, 1987), and few would argue that college life is not without its share of psychological stressors.

Most of the research on stress in college students has focused on four-year colleges and universities (Elliot & Gramling, 1990; Launier, 1997; Swift & O'Dougherty Wright, 2000; Whatley & Clopton, 1992), with few studies focusing on the experience and needs of the more vulnerable community population. National norms for fall 1999 reported increased stress for students entering college for the first time, with levels of stress being twice as high for women (Higher Education Research Institute, 1999). This survey of freshmen students indicated that women have more financial concerns than men, and that they spend more of their time away from school tending to family and work obligations, while men tend to spend their free time engaging in sports and leisure activities that tend to reduce stress. Stress in the general college student population has tended to focus on the transition of high school to college, personality factors, and symptomatology (Cohen et al, 1987; Youngren & Lewinsohn, 1980; Wong & Whitaker, 1994). Social support as a buffer to the experience of stress has also been looked at in college students. Swift and O'Dougherty Wright (2000) found that global social support and self-esteem support have a significant buffering effect across stressful life events, particularly as they related to symptoms of anxiety and depression. College students have been reported to experience numerous life stressors related to interpersonal and familial relationships, and financial problems. In looking at social

support and affective symptoms in a group of disabled and non-disabled college students, Winterowd, Street, and Boswell (1998), found perceived social support to be a critical moderator of anxiety and depression.

In a study that looked at stress and emotional life complexes in a group of students attending a historically African-American college, Launier (1997) found financial concerns to be perceived as most stressful by students. He postulated that such pervasive distress could reduce and even undermine the individual's efforts to succeed, as well as reduce the effectiveness of support systems. This is particularly true of the urban community college population, which is typically comprised of students who are often academically under prepared and who face many financial challenges. Retention and graduation rates continue to be a problem for college campuses across the country, but is even more pronounced in urban areas, whose students are poor, under prepared, older and who often juggle work and family life, while attempting to better their education. The list of stressors for these students seems endless, which makes understanding the external pressures that affect community college students of critical importance when looking at issues affecting retention. The students enrolled at Bronx Community College fit the description of students studying in other urban areas. The student body is comprised of non-traditional students, ranging in age from late 20s to mid 40s, and representing the Latino (52%) and African-American (41%) communities. In a recent article, Moss (2000) reports that many of these students hold jobs or other work assignments in addition to their course load, all of which is sure to add a significant amount of stress.

In this study, stress and coping are examined in the context of a group of community college students enrolled in an experientially taught stress reduction course, its purpose being to identify stressors and coping skills in a community college population. The credit-bearing course, offered through the Department of Health, Physical Education, and Wellness, introduced students to the effects of stress on physical and emotional health. The course is offered to students who have completed their first semester and aims to provide students with a coordinates mind/body approach to stress management. The three-hour course met twice a week and was divided into an hour lecture, which covered topics such as recognizing and restructuring distorted perceptions, assertive communication and active listening, time management, grade related anxiety, and basic heath care information related to managing stress. An additional two-hour weekly session was held in the dance studio and focused on stress reducing activities, including yoga, meditation, tai chi, jogging, and vigorous exercise.

The present study was undertaken with two issues in mind: to explore the possible positive effects of experiential learning, and to shed light on stressors affecting the community college student. Understanding the issues that are most troublesome to our students will help us develop and initiate proactive measures that will not only improve their well being, but which will hopefully also improve the students' chances to complete their education.

METHOD

Participants

The subjects for this study were a group of 30 community college students who were registered in a stress reduction course. A brief explanation was given on the second day of class and only students that consented to participate were used. Demographic information was obtained through a questionnaire, which was included with the packet that they completed. Of the 30 students, 27 were females (90%) and 3 were males (10%). The mean age for this group was 27.57, with a standard deviation of 7.86 and an age range from 18 to 50. All of the students were of minority group status, with 18 being of African-American background (60%) and the remaining 12 of Latino background (40%). The majority of students were single (80%), 6.67 % were married, and 13.34 percent were divorced. Among the male students 1 was divorced and a father of 1, while the other two had never married. Of the 25 women who were single, separated or divorced, a great portion of them reported to be single parents (64%), with the mean number of children being 1.53. Of the 30 students, 9 were on Public Assistance (30%), 11 had part-time employment (36.6%), 4 had full-time employment (13.33%) and 3 reported their income as "other". The mean Grade Point Average for students was 2.75. Few students reported having received any type of personal counseling (86%).

Instruments

The adult version of the Life Stressors and Social Resources Inventory (LISRES-A) covers eight domains of life stressors and social support resources. It taps into both the stable aspects of stressors and support, as well as changes over a one-year period. The LISRES-A has a total of sixteen scales, nine of which measure life stressors and seven, which measure social resources. The eight domains covered are physical health, housing and neighborhood, finances, work, relationship with spouse or partner, relationships with children, relationship with extended family, and relationships with friends or social groups. There are a total of 200 questions in the LISRES-A. Life stressors are assessed on the eight domains, as well as on an index of negative life events over the previous year. Social resources comprise of perceived status and/or support in each of the above-mentioned domains, as well as an index of positive life events that have taken place within the last year. The LISRES-A uses a self-report format and may be used with a diverse population aged 18 years and older, with a minimal sixth grade reading level. It uses a T-score format, with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10. Internal consistency and reliabilities for the LISRES-A range from .77 to .93 for the stressor scales and from .50 to .92 for the resources scales.

The adult form of the Coping Resources Inventory (CRI-A) is a 48-item measure of eight different types of coping responses, which are in turn subdivided into approach and avoidance coping responses. The eight scales are: Logical Analysis (LA), Positive

Appraisal (PR), Seeking Guidance and Support (SG), and Problem Solving (PS) for the approach strategies, and Cognitive Avoidance (CA), Acceptance and Resignation (AR), Seeking Alternative Rewards (SR), and Emotional Discharge (ED) for the avoidance responses. The CRI-A is a self-report scale that uses a 4-point scale that varies from "not at all" to "fairly often" to rate their response to a recent stressor. Like the LISRES-A, the CRI-A may be used with a diverse adult population aged 18 years and older. Raw scores are converted to T-scores with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10. Internal consistency for the CRI-A, using Cronbach's alpha, range from .63 to .71 for women and .68 to .74 for male subjects on the approach responses. Avoidance responses for women showed internal consistencies of .58 to .71 and for males, the values ranged from .62 to .72.

Hypotheses

Because the aim of this study was to explore the possible benefits of experiential learning, a general premise of this study was that students would show significant differences between the two administrations of the LISRES-A and CRI-A. Three hypotheses were generated, a priori to test the relationship between scores pre-test scores for stressors, support, and coping responses. On the LISRES-A, specific questions across the 9 stressor domains, and the 6 domains for support are combined to produce scores on negative life events (NLE), as well as positive life events (PLE), which were used in formulating hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 was used as a measure of total stress and focused perceived negative life events states, stating that students would report more negative life events (Pre-NLE) at the beginning of the semester than at the end; that is Pre-NLE scores would be higher than Post-NLE. Similarly, hypothesis 2 postulated an increase in positive life events, on post-test scores (Post-PLE).

Hypothesis 3 dealt with coping responses, and proposed that students would report an increase in approach responses on the second administration. That is, the sum of post scores on Logical Analysis (PLA), Positive Appraisal (PA), Seeking Guidance (PSG), and Problems Solving (PS), would be significantly higher than the pre-test scores on these same variables. Conversely, hypothesis 4 stated that students would report a decrease in avoidance responses on post-test scores. In other words, Post-avoidance responses as measured by the sum of Cognitive Avoidance (PCA), Acceptance/Resignation (PAR), Seeking Alternative Rewards (PSR), and Emotional Discharge (PED), would be lower than the sum of these variables at the initial administration.

Procedures

The study was introduced to students enrolled in a Stress Reduction course at Bronx Community College. Participation in the study was voluntary, although credit for one homework assignment was given in return for participation. Of 32 students

enrolled in the class, two refused to participate. A total of 30 students, 3 males and 27 females comprised the subject pool for this study.

The LISRES-A and CRI-A were administered on two separate occasions, as the study aimed to examine the possible benefits of experiential learning. The first administration was during the second class meeting. Students were given the questionnaires and asked to complete and return them on the following week, when the class met again. The second administration was at the end of the semester. Although there were a few stragglers, most students returned the material in a timely manner.

RESULTS

The results of descriptive statistics obtained on the pre and post measures were reviewed to gain a better understanding of the stressors, resources, and coping strategies used by community college students. Because the subject pool was comprised primarily of women, gender differences were not explored. The small sample size prohibited the use of t-test comparisons on all the variables. T-tests were performed on the a priori hypotheses, while descriptive statistics were used to understand, in a qualitative manner, the levels of stress and the types of coping used by community college students. Tables 1 and 2 show the T-scores and standard deviations for subjects' LISRES-A scores. The criteria recommended by Moss and Moss (1994) for interpreting T-scores on the LISRES-A were used to determine scores that differed from the average (M=50, SD=10) for stress and support variables, and are identified by asterisks.

Table 1 presents the T-scores and standard deviations of the subjects' LISRES-A scores. Asterisks were placed on scores that represent above average stress levels. Examinations of the descriptive statistics show that most of the students in the study experienced a significant amount of stress related to their living conditions (HN= 60.56, SD=13.68); this stressor, was of a pervasive nature, as post-HN results reflect equally above average scores (PHN=60.11, SD=18.20). As can be seen in Table 1, issues related to finances, children, and family were produced above average stress levels for students in both pre and post-test questionnaires. The students in this study perceive themselves as having few resources and social support, variables that are often considered to be buffers of stress.

Table 1

	Pre-stressors		Post-stressors	
	Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**
Physical Health (PH)	44.53	8.26	41.57	3.92
House/ Neighborhood (HN)	60.56**	13.68	60.11**	18.20
Finances (FIN)	59.88*	11.23	59.29*	8.62
Work (WK)	43.14	18.82	50.19	15.95
Spouse (SP)	45.30	14.94	49.42	16.91
Children (CH)	58.41*	15.16	56.00*	16.67
Family	56.91*	9.81	59.54*	11.11
Friends	54.42	9.94	52.32	12.94
NLE	56.81*	11.22	47.12	11.98

* somewhat above average
** well above average

	Pre-support		Post-support	
Finances	44.62*	7.58	45.63	7.82
Work	31.81***	12.36	35.00**	14.49
Spouse	33.68**	15.40	41.56*	17.93
Children	40.96	16.76	43.47	17.87
Family	48.53	10.89	46.42	10.47
Friends	47.03	11.23	45.69	14.21
PLE **(Positive Life Events)**	59.56^	15.58	55.25^	15.65

* somewhat below average support
** well below average support
*** considerably below average support
^ somewhat above average support

The criteria recommended by Moss (1993) for interpreting T-scores on the CRI-A were used to determine scores that differed from the average (M=50, SD=10) for coping responses and are identified by asterisks. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics on the coping responses questionnaire (CRI-A), which suggests that on average, most students make use of approach coping behaviors but there is a tendency by students to use avoidance behaviors (CA=55.52, SD=11.22) and ED=60.38, SD=10.86); this remained consistent at post-test with a mean Cognitive Avoidance response of 55.85, SD=10.69,

and a mean Emotional Discharge score of 64.56, SD=11.18. Indeed, students seemed to move toward more avoidance responses toward the end of the semester, as shown by elevated scores on all measures of avoidant behaviors ob post-test measures.

Table 2

	Pre-coping		Post-coping	
	Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**
Logical Analysis (LA)	47.79	9.59	49.53	10.14
Positive Appraisal (PA)	50.66	8.74	52.44	8.95
Seeking Guidance (SG)	47.66	8.93	50.81	9.99
Problem Solving (PS)	51.59	9.95	51.04	11.33
Cognitive Avoidance (CA)	55.52*	11.22	55.85*	10.69
Acceptance / Resignation (AR)	51.34	8.74	55.19*	9.26
Seeking Alternative Rewards (SR)	50.17	10.03	55.44*	9.76
Emotional Discharge (ED)	60.38**	10.86	64.56*	11.18

* somewhat above average use
** well above average use

Paired t-test statistics were done on a priori generated hypotheses. Hypothesis 1, which compared scores on pre and post negative life events, was confirmed. There was a significant difference in students' perception of negative life events from the beginning to the end of the semester ($t = 4.287$, $df = 25$, $p < .001$). No significant difference was found in comparisons of students' pre and post positive life event scores, as postulated in Hypothesis 2.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 focused on coping responses. Paired t-tests were done on pre and post measures on the approach variables, as well as on avoidance variables. No significant results were found. The descriptive statistics suggests that although approach tactics appeared to remain stable over time, there was an increase in avoidance behaviors for post-test coping performance.

DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this study was to explore the possible effects of experiential learning on perceived stress on a group of community college students. Of the hypotheses to explore this relationship, only hypothesis 1 was proven to be significant.

That is, students reported higher levels of stress associated with negative life events at the beginning of the semester. Because the course focused on recognizing and restructuring distorted perceptions, as well as on using more assertive communications, it is possible that as a result of the class, students shifted the way in which they appraised their various concerns. Certainly, a benefit of participating in such a class is that students not only learn about stress for academic and career purposes, but also that the learning can be used to better manage stressors that create obstacles in their lives.

No differences were found between perceived positive life events at the beginning and end of the semester; students reported somewhat above average support on both the pre and post measures. In essence, the data implies that while students perceive fewer negative life events after participating in the class, they do not report an increase in positive life events. While this may seem rather contradictory, closer inspection of the descriptive statistics show that for most students, there has been little, if any, change in the individual measures that comprise positive life events. Positive life events reflect an overall measure of social support, which includes resources related to finances, work, family and friends. This suggests that it may be easier to change one's perception of what has been deemed "negative" than to affect changes in areas that are out of one's control. The descriptive statistics may help explain this further. The typical community college student in this sample was almost twenty-eight years old, a single parent, and a member of a disadvantaged minority group, typically African-American or Latino. Of the 30 subjects in this sample, 36.6% held part-time jobs, while 30% were on public assistance. While not specifically asked, many students at Bronx Community College are participants in the "Work Experience Program", a government based initiative that "requires" that individuals on public assistance work an average of 20 hours in some type of community service. Thus, students have to juggle work, full-time course work, and the demands of family life, all of which are sure to create additional stress, on an already burdened support system. Students typically report being grateful for the support that they do have, even though it may not be sufficient. That college students experience an increased amount of stress related to work demands was found by the Higher Education Research Institute, which reported that 24.7 % of students in 1999 as compared to 15.7 in 1982 stated that they were likely to need to work full-time while attending college (Higher Education research Institute, 1999).

Comparisons between coping responses on pre and post measures yielded no significant results. Students used typical coping strategies to deal with stress. Of interest though not statistically significant, the students in this sample showed an increased use of avoidance strategies at the end of the semester. Scores on avoidance coping strategies were consistently above average in all areas at the end of the semester. It should be noted that post tests were conducted during final examinations, which may have had a spurious effect on the avoidance coping scores. Did the students in this sample increase their avoidance responses as a result of the additional stress produce by finals or do they typically react to any mounting stress by increasing their avoidance strategies? The answer to these questions would be useful to counselors and other mental health service providers, as well as to the instructors of classes such as the Stress

Reduction course. Emphasizing approach rather than avoidance strategies may help students make a better adjustment to college by learning more effective ways to manage stress.

More research is needed to explore the stressors faced by community college students, as well as the coping strategies they use to solve problems. More information is needed to help identify the factors that influence adequate adjustment to college in the community college population. This study was limited by the small sample size (N=30), which should be increased in future studies. Feedback from students included the suggestion to use shorter versions of the questionnaires, which might increase compliance. Students' generally reported limited amounts of time and numerous obligations, which ought to be kept in mind when planning for supportive intervention services.

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